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SUBJECT: FORMER IRANIAN MP: REFORMERS TRYING TO REGROUP

CLASSIFIED BY: Jason L. Davis, Consul General, Dubai, UAE.

REASON: 1.4 (d)

¶1. (S) Summary: Iranian reform leader and former member of parliament Fatemeh Haghighatjoo (please protect) believes that international pressure on Iran, but not war, will produce positive results on both the nuclear and the human rights fronts. She admits the reform movement is in disarray and to date has suffered from an inability to unify; she believes the solution is more extensive media efforts. She supports former presidential candidate Karroubi's efforts to open a private television channel, which will reportedly follow a BBC/CNN model. On the recent presidential election, she thinks a combination of fraud and a genuine response to his not-so-genuine promises of economic relief brought Ahmadinejad to power. Now in office, the new government is pursuing corruption cases against reformers. End summary.

¶2. (S) Fatemeh Haghighatjoo (please protect), an Iranian reform leader and former member of parliament from Tehran, came to ConGen Dubai September 21 to pick up an exchange visitor visa (J) for herself and her family. She is going to MIT for a fellowship in its Center for International Studies, where she will focus on human rights issues. She gave PolEconChief the following overview of her perspective on current Iranian affairs.

Recommendation for Foreign Governments: Pressure

¶3. (S) Haghighatjoo called the Iranian Government's recent threats on the nuclear issue, such as pulling out of the NPT, "lies". Saying "I know this government," she predicted that serious international pressure, including from the United Nations Security Council, would make it cave. However, she repeatedly underscored that she did not believe war against Iran was the solution.

¶4. (S) On the human rights front she also said she believed outside pressure on Iran was effective. She thought foreign statements spotlighting specific cases, such as Iranian political prisoner Akbar Ganji, on the balance offer more help than harm to the affected individuals. It should not be forgotten, however, that there are lots of other political prisoners in Iran, she noted.

Recommendation for Iranian Reformers: Organize

¶5. (S) Haghighatjoo repeated what we hear from all sources: that the reform movement in Iran is in disarray, and that reformers have not been able to form an alliance amongst themselves. She cited a "lack of internal media support" as one of the main reasons for this, indicating that without media coverage of their point-of-view and issues, reformers could not succeed. Unsurprisingly, she said the state media organs, as well as the legal framework of Iran, work against reformers. She added that the government knows that the Iranian people are generally pro-American, so it deliberately slants press coverage against the U.S. in an attempt to discredit it in the eyes of the

people. She believes such efforts are successful only with the "uneducated class" in Iran.

¶6. (S) In the absence of a free domestic press, she said reformers should work on media projects from outside Iran. She praised Radio Farda and the BBC's Persian service, and mentioned that a Dutch government project to open a Farsi language TV channel was attracting quality Iranian journalists. On the other hand, she criticized the Los Angeles-based Farsi language commercial television channels as "lacking" in terms of intelligent content.

#### Karroubi Hits the Airwaves

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¶7. (S) Haghighatjoo confirmed reports in the press and from other contacts that former presidential candidate and former Majlis Speaker Mehdi Karroubi is planning to launch a private Iranian television channel. She said she had recently seen Karroubi and encouraged him to pursue this project. (Note: press reports refer to Karroubi's station as Iran's first privately-owned station, but indicate that the station will be based outside the country, in Dubai -- which we have not been able to confirm. Called 'Saba' Television, it will launch at the end of Ramadan and be modeled after the BCC, CNN, al-Jazeera, and al-Arabiya. Contacts say it is supposed to be more "objective" in its news coverage than Iranian state TV. Karroubi is also reportedly opening a newspaper.)

#### Election Assessment

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¶8. (S) Haghighatjoo said Ahmadinejad won the presidency with a combination of organized fraud and real votes by people responding to his populist economic message. She claimed all candidates, even conservatives Qalibaf and Larijani, complained of cheating, but most then agreed to stay quiet. She is personally convinced that Karroubi, not Ahmadinejad, got more legitimate votes in the first round and should thus have made the second round. (According to published results of the first round of voting, Ahmadinejad came in second place with 19.48 percent of the vote, and Karroubi in third with 17.28 percent).

¶9. (S) Those who actually voted for Ahmadinejad were responding to his campaign promises to improve their economic situation, Haghighatjoo said. She added that Karroubi was the only other candidate to speak directly on economic issues. Reformer candidate Moin only spoke indirectly about the economic hardships facing the people, claiming that with democracy, the economy would improve. Despite Ahmadinejad's campaign rhetoric, Haghighatjoo was dismissive of the chance of structural economic change coming soon to Iran.

¶10. (S) Haghighatjoo also said that after eight years of President Khatami, many wanted a president who came across as strong. However, Haghighatjoo echoed a common view that Ahmadinejad has no power himself, that the Supreme Leader retains control. As to why Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) would want to move into the realm of political power, she thought perhaps they were inspired by the political role the military has played in Pakistan and Turkey. Furthermore, the military was likely worried that if reformers managed to retain the presidency, they could eventually succeed at reducing the military's power.

¶11. (S) In her view, Supreme Leader Khamene'i decided post-election that he no longer needs defeated presidential candidate Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, although she doubts he will actually run Rafsanjani out on corruption charges. She confirmed that the government is, however, pursuing corruption cases against some former officials, mostly reformers. Regarding her own situation, the Iranian judiciary was threatening to bring her up on charges related to speeches she had given calling for the release of student activists.

#### Comment

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¶12. (S) Comment: We note that Haghighatjoo is unlikely to have any first-hand knowledge of the Iranian government's negotiating positions on the nuclear issue or actual evidence of fraud in the elections. Nonetheless, she is an astute observer of the new government and an experienced reform leader. Now 37, she told us she started her own political activities while still at university. She impressed PolEconChief as a very capable and charismatic activist who feels driven to work for real change in Iran.

¶13. (S) Haghighatjoo is one of three noteworthy Iranian reformers we know of issued J or H-1B visas within the past month for academic work in the U.S., including noted blogger Omid Memarian (going to UC Berkeley's School of Journalism) and Akbar Atri (going to the Human Rights Center at Yale). She mentioned that her husband is a journalist and plans to pursue a master's degree in journalism while they are in the U.S.

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